

Housing Scrutiny Committee - 20 January 2020

Minutes of the meeting of the Housing Scrutiny Committee held at Committee Room 4, Town Hall, Upper Street, N1 2UD - Islington Town Hall on 20 January 2020 at 7.30 pm.

Present: **Councillors:** O'Sullivan (Chair), Lukes (Vice-Chair), Debono, Hamitouche, Heather, Mackmurdie, Spall, McDonald (Co-Optee) and Donaghey (Co-Optee)

Councillor Michael O'Sullivan in the Chair

142 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE (Item 1)

Apologies were received from Councillor Gallagher.

143 DECLARATION OF SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS (Item 2)

None

144 DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS (Item 3)

There were no declarations of interest.

145 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING (Item 4)

RESOLVED:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 25 November 2019 be confirmed as an accurate record of proceedings and the Chair be authorised to sign them.

146 CHAIR'S REPORT (Item 5)

The Chair informed the meeting that Partners Improvement will be attending the meeting of 3 March, an opportunity for members to review performances of Partners in the last year.

The Executive Member for Housing, Councillor Ward informed members that Tom Irvine of Partners had been advised of the Committee's expectation that the presentation should include specific examples of issues of disrepairs, and how it was resolved and not just statistics.

147 ORDER OF BUSINESS (Item 6)

The order of business would be B2, B1, B3 and B4.

148 PUBLIC QUESTIONS (Item 7)

None

149 **2018/19 MINI SCRUTINY REVIEW (HOMELESSNESS) - PRESENTATION AND DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS (Item B1)**

Karen Lucas, Director Housing Needs and Strategy provided members with a brief background on the mini review carried out about Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in the borough. In addition a presentation highlighting the scope of the review, its findings and concerns was received.

Finally members were invited to consider and contribute to the draft recommendations.

The following issues were highlighted and discussed.

The Scrutiny Initiation Document was agreed on 14 January 2019 but due to time constraints; witness unavailability; a decision was taken for the review to be included in the work programme of the 2019/2020 municipal year.

The review considered how the Council's Housing Services manages homelessness; the legislative frameworks; performances and outcomes related to homelessness; the use of temporary accommodation; rough sleeping and partnership working.

Members were reminded of their visits and meeting staff of Streets Kitchen, Solace, St Mungo's, Glasshouse temporary shelter, Now Medical, the Streets Festival and Jubaa Somalia organisation. Also the Chair attended a seminar on homelessness and the committee had received a presentation from Islington Law Centre.

The Director of Housing Needs acknowledged the significant reductions in the number of homelessness decisions in the last 3 years especially when compared to other London boroughs. This was primarily due to the Services focus on engaging on more preventive activities.

Members were informed of strong partnership working across the public sector and the voluntary sector; Leadership officers attending Strategic Housing meetings across the North London sub-region and the pan London Councils meetings, all with a view to alleviating homelessness.

Data provided shows that in 2017/18, 2,504 households approached the Council's Housing Team for advice and the reasons provided vary from family breakdown, domestic abuse and loss of private sector accommodation. In addition other reasons for seeking assistance included residents having children or expecting a child as a common category of priority need each year, making up 78% of all households accepted in 2017/18.

With regards to placing households in temporary accommodation, members were informed that although largely stable across London, it is noticeable that this has been on the increase in the last two years.

Members were informed that despite market challenges, the Council continues to experience reductions in out of borough placements, which indicates that a significant proportion of homeless households were still able to retain their social,

family, educational and employment networks.

The meeting was informed of concerns raised Director highlighted concerns raised by voluntary organisations such as Solace and Islington Law Centre. This included vulnerable women finding it difficult to access services and the Council's continued reliance on the services of its commissioned medical advice service for assessing applications for social housing applications. Other concerns raised was what role in particular do Housing Associations play with regards to preventing homelessness especially as they manage over 14,500 residents.

A street count exercise carried out by members and officers acknowledges an increasing number of rough sleeping on Islington Streets.

A copy of the draft recommendations was circulated at the meeting for consideration. The Chair informed members that although not an exhaustive list, he welcomed any additional recommendations to be submitted to the clerk of the committee.

The Chair informed members that the final report will be circulated ahead of the next meeting when it will be agreed and signed off.

RESOLVED:

That the draft recommendations be noted, subject to including an additional recommendation which will read: 'The Service would need to give consideration to the support given to vulnerable people when discharged from hospital.

That the final report be agreed at the next meeting of the committee

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2019/2020 MINI SCRUTINY REVIEW (PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR) - PRESENTATION AND WITNESS EVIDENCE (TO FOLLOW) (Item B2)

Members received a presentation from both Janice Gibbons, Service Manager (Environmental Health) and Karen Lucas (Director Housing Needs and Strategy) on the Private Rented Sector. A copy of both presentations is interleaved with the agenda.

The following main points were raised in the presentation and discussed:

- Islington presently has over 25,217 privately rented properties which represents 27% of the total housing stock. It is noticeable that since 2011 that the private sector is experiencing the highest level of growth across all housing sectors.
- Members were advised that in light of the shortage in social rented housing, properties in private accommodation attract rents of about £1752 rent per month and this remains a challenge especially for young private renters as this represents about 34% of their income.

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- The Council through Housing Services provides help and support for people who live in privately rented properties, signposting residents to accredited private landlords and liaises with landlords who provide temporary accommodation for people designated as homeless.
- Other support includes a phone advice service, a drop in service at 222 Upper Street, funding organisations like the Citizen Advice Bureau which is located at 222 Upper Street and Islington Law centre. The Council offers monthly outreach surgeries for hard to reach communities in children centres, community centres, Finsbury Park Mosque and Job centres
- Members were informed of the importance of the Trailblazer programme, the Early Homelessness Prevention Service in alleviating homelessness.
- Meeting was informed that information such as Landlord Accreditation schemes; complaints procedure and a London rents map showing average rents is published on the council website.
- Meeting was informed that staff are trained in negotiation skills when issues arise with landlords to resolve issues with their tenants.
- With regard to Landlords forum, the Director acknowledged that in recent year the noticeable drop in attendance the Service will be looking at ways of raising its profile as it recognises their value and contribution in alleviating homelessness. Similarly the Council is keen to hear the views of private sector tenants about the advice and support available to them.
- Figures provided show that of the 2,488 clients that sought advice from CAB, only 8% were identified as private sector clients. The Director acknowledged that more work will be required in this area as it is obvious that private renters were not accessing this valuable resource.
- Members were advised that as many residents were unlikely to be offered social housing, the private sector remains the only option to help prevent homelessness.
- Islington Lettings and Islington Residential, the two letting schemes run by the Council, work in partnership with approximately 15 private sector landlords across London. The council pays the landlord either an incentive fee or a rent deposit fee. Most of the landlords offer a minimum tenancy term of 12 months with some exceptions of up to 2 years.
- In response to a question about rents being charged for residents placed in private accommodation by the Council, Members were advised that market rates are being charged.
- The Director advised that although private accommodation is available for households identified as homeless, the aim of the Council in the last few years has been to reduce the number of households placed in private accommodation. Members were advised that in the last year, Housing Services have acquired properties to ensure that the standard of temporary accommodation is of good standard.
- The Right to Rent was rolled out across the whole of England on 1 February 2016. In response to a question on refusal rates, meeting was advised that presently there is no data available.
- The Director in response acknowledged that in cases of refusals, the housing team could make referrals to the No Recourse to Public Funds. Meeting was informed that Islington Law Centre have noticed an increase in the number

of refugees experiencing difficulty in assessing housing.

In terms of residential environmental health, a number of issues were highlighted -

- Environmental Health (EH) investigates over 500 complaints and referrals relating to poor private housing conditions each year and in most cases landlords tend to address the issues raised by private tenants.
- Islington has over 663 Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) which are licensed and are subject to inspection at least once in 5 years.
- Net cost of Environmental Health is £500,000, it comprises a small team of 9.5 equivalent enforcement officers and receives about £250,000 income from licensing and enforcement fees.
- Enforcement action taken is proportionate to the issues raised. This could be either verbal or a written notice of intention, formal notices or Financial Penalty Notices.
- Members were advised that in more serious cases with landlords, Environmental Health will prosecute, issue Rent Repayment Orders, and initiate action under the Proceeds of Crime Act.
- Mandatory HMO Licensing applies to any rented property that is occupied by five or more people who form more than one household and share basic amenities such as a kitchen, bathroom or toilet. There is an Additional HMO's Licensing scheme covering HMOs occupied by 3 or 4 people in Holloway Road and Caledonian Road that ends in September 2020.
- Following consultation in 2019, the meeting was advised that council proposes to roll out a borough wide Additional HMO Licensing Scheme and a Selective Licensing Scheme covering all privately rented accommodation during 2020.
- In addition to the above, the manager advised that the Councils has a commitment to consult on proposals to introduce selective licensing for all privately rented properties in 6-7 wards.
- In response to a question on whether EH's remit extended to privately rented properties owned by leaseholders on council estates, the Manager advised that the Service will only intervene where there are issues that can be dealt with under the Housing Act for example issues such as damp, electrical faults.
- In response to a question, the Manager advised that the service has powers to investigate Registered Social Landlords (RSL's). In most instances when issues are brought to EH's attention, this is raised with RSL managers to resolve.
- In response to a suggestion on whether Islington letting activities should be discontinued considering that it is not meeting it's aims, the Director of Housing Needs acknowledged that a further analysis would still need to be carried out, however a decision has been taken pending its review to put a temporary arrangement in place to run both schemes together pending a business assessment. The Director of Housing Needs informed members that

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a review of the financial model would need to be carried out prior to any decision being taken.

- With regard to private renting concerns on council estate, meeting was informed that colleagues in Homes and Communities would refer any compliant issues to Environmental Health.
- In light of the initial findings from the review carried out on the Right to Rent about private renters being unfairly discriminated against and whether council staff were prepared to handle enquires, the Director of Housing Needs acknowledged that additional training could be provided in this area.
- With regard to the recent refusal by the Secretary of State to renew the Liverpool Licensing scheme and its implications with the Finsbury Park Selective Licensing Scheme, the manager advised that Finsbury Park scheme will not require permission from the Secretary of State.

The Chair invited Rowan Milligan of Law for Life, an educational and information charity which provides community based education and training on a range of legal issues. The following points were noted -

A recent survey carried out among private tenants welcomed the proposed extension of the licensing scheme but there were reservations on how it is to be regulated especially as local authorities had limited resources.

Private tenants had concerns with the length of time and processes in resolving complaints about living conditions with Environmental health and possible repercussions as it does not prevent landlords issuing section 21 no fault evictions. Members were advised that although disrepair complaints remain a major cause of no fault evictions, there is no evidence of increasing tenants protections in the rollout of this policy.

With regards the Right to Rent policy and evidence that over 44% of landlords refuse to rent to someone without a UK passport, Members were advised that the issue here lies with the landlords refusal and the issue here lies not in council staff not being adequately trained but

The Law for Life welcomes Islington Council's decision to bring the vulnerability assessments in house with the hope that other authorities will follow suit it and also pleased with the roll-out of Housing First accommodation, a stellar success rates in other places where it has been rolled out effectively.

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151 **QUARTERLY REVIEW OF HOUSING PERFORMANCE (Q2 - 2019/2020)**
(Item B3)

Councillor Diarmaid Ward, Executive Member for Housing and Development, introduced the quarterly performance report.

The following main points were noted in the discussion:

- The Executive Member informed the meeting that in the last quarter the number of affordable homes built had fallen substantially.
- Members were advised that performance in repairs continues to improve, from 85.4% at the end of the previous quarter to 87.0% at the end of this quarter. The Executive Member informed the meeting that issues around the dashboard is IT related.
- Rent arrears continues to increase and below the profiled target for the point in the year and this is mostly driven by the continued roll-out of Universal Credit in the borough.
- With regard to street homelessness, members were informed that 60 people were supported into accommodation in comparison to 8 in the previous year and this was due to a myriad of factors, in particular the austerity measures introduced by the present government.
- The Executive Member advised members that the Council would no longer be using the services of Now Medical in assessing housing applications.
- In response to a request for ward councillors be kept to date on personnel changes in the Housing Area offices, the Director Housing Needs acknowledged that changes are still ongoing but will ensure that Councillors receive the contact details of personnel when in post.

RESOLVED:

That the report be noted

152 **WORK PROGRAMME 2019/20 (Item B4)**
RESOLVED:

That the work programme be noted.

The meeting ended at 9.15 pm

CHAIR